

Muslim communities under surveillance

Basia Spalek and Bob Lambert argue that anti-terrorism policies and increased police activity have alienated Muslims and failed to improve national security.

The events of 11 September 2001, and more recently, the 7 July 2005 bombings and attempted bombings on 21 July 2005, have stimulated much research interest and policy attention towards Muslim minorities living in the UK, as well as in other liberal democratic societies. The national security measures that have been put in place since 2001 are underpinned by a new apprehension of the challenges posed by minority and immigrant populations as not only current or prospective citizens, but also as the potential targets of recruitment for terrorist groups. Ethnic minorities associated with Islam are therefore experiencing increased attention from the police and security services, invoking an 'othering' of the communities concerned.

In the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, with the dawning realisation that the terrorists were home-grown British citizens, much political and media attention has focused on potential pathways to radicalisation, and identifying possible web sites that may aid and abet the transmission of extremist Islamist viewpoints and violent action. The risks posed by marginalised Muslim youth, the extent to which Muslim communities are 'assimilated' within British society, whether Muslim converts, particularly those who convert to Islam inside prison, are at risk from 'radicalisation', and whether Islamic institutions and organisations are 'out of touch' with their young people, and whether this also creates the potential for 'radicalisation' are all the frequent focus of media and political discourse. In many ways, this exploration, and the anxiety which goes with it, mirrors the conditions of contemporary western society, characterised as late modern society. Late modern society is defined as a continuous probing of established beliefs and increasing reflexivity, where 'the deviant other is everywhere' and 'everyone is a potential deviant' (Young, 1999: 15).

In the UK, a series of anti-terror laws have been implemented, including the Terrorism Act 2000, the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, the Prevention of Terrorism 2005, and the Terrorism Act 2006. These new anti-terror laws have been criticised by civil liberties organisations as being draconian, making little, if any, impact on national security. These laws have also provoked outrage amongst Muslim communities, who feel that they are being unfairly targeted.

For instance, in Britain, figures for police stop and searches in 2002/03 under counter-terrorism legislation, revealed that the number of stops and searches of Asians had increased by 302 per cent in a year compared to a rise of 230 per cent for blacks and 118 per cent for whites. The Muslim Council of Britain claimed that '... the police are misusing their new powers ... We think that the institutional racism highlighted by the Macpherson Report is morphing into institutional prejudice against Muslims. We are worried a generation of young Muslim men is being criminalised' (Cowan, 2004: 8). Similarly, the Preventing Extremism Together Working Group on security/policing, assembled in the aftermath of the 7 July bombings, made up of Muslim community representatives, has raised concerns about the possible breadth of new powers being introduced by the Terrorism Act 2006:

'Inciting, justifying or glorifying terrorism as currently formulated could lead to a significant chill factor in the Muslim community in expressing legitimate support for self-determination struggles around the world and in using legitimate concepts and terminology because of fear of being misunderstood and implicated for terrorism by the authorities (Home Office: 2005a: 77).'

It might be argued that the implementation of anti-terror laws which could be used disproportionately against Muslims, with the potential for increased surveillance and control, stands at odds with another core component of counter-terror policing: the importance of the involvement of Muslim communities in helping to combat extremism, as highlighted in a series of government policy documents. For example, in the National Policing Plan 2005-08 (Home Office, 2005b) it is stated that the 'counter-terrorism strategy of Government is underpinned by strong intelligence processes within each force area and strong communities to build and increase trust and confidence within minority faith communities'. Muslims' responsibilities as active citizens are therefore being increasingly framed by anti-terror measures which encourage internal community surveillance so that the responsible Muslim citizen is expected to work with the authorities to help reduce the risk of terrorism. Moreover, Muslims who retain strong visible allegiances to Islam – in some cases giving them an outward and superficial resemblance to Osama

bin Laden – and strong adherence to the political grievances bin Laden skilfully exploits, become less congenial partners for government Ministers and counter-terrorism officials. To become a counter-terrorism partner it helps a Muslim community representative to become less critical of the global war on terror and more compliant to government policy.

In the event, such a narrow focus on the responsibilities of a faith community exposes further tensions within and between counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation policy. Asking a faith community to share ownership of a terrorism problem is to overlook the extent to which the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the UK know very little about it. That is to say, the ideology that inspires and promulgates suicide bombing in the UK has been nurtured over a long period in a very small section of what are very heterogeneous and independent Muslim communities in the UK. It is not uncommon, for instance, within one London borough to find five or more mosques that represent different ethnic and religious groups with no history of interaction between them. Yet unwittingly, they share a common ignorance of violent extremism. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the UK have no more knowledge of al-Qaeda-related terrorist ideology and how young people are attracted to it than the rest of the population.

Consequently, when government and police chiefs prevailed upon mainstream Muslim leaders to help tackle the problem in the immediate aftermath of 7/7 some responded by highlighting just how little they understood about what was happening. That was one important reason why they called for a public enquiry: they wanted to be given an authoritative and independent explanation for 7/7 before deciding what, if anything, they could do in response.

Ironically, those Muslim communities where there was an understanding of the problem, combined with real experience in tackling it, were the ones that bore the main brunt of a wide-ranging counter-terrorism policy. Indeed, their representatives had long complained to the authorities that insufficient was being done to counter the adverse influence of notable violent extremists in their midst. For at least seven years before 9/11 influential and active promoters of al-Qaeda terrorism had made it their business to subvert Muslim youth to their cause. Influential extremist figures such as Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza and Abdullah el Faisal infiltrated minority sections of the UK Muslim community that are best described as Salafi – Muslims who value a literal, textual approach to their religion in much the same way that many Protestant Christians do. From a mainstream UK Salafi perspective al-Qaeda terrorism is totally unjustified. Yet when Salafi leaders raised the problem posed by the likes of Abu Qatada to the authorities prior to 9/11, they were met with indifference.

After 9/11 the situation got worse – instead of being ignored they were associated with the terrorist

problem itself. Their experience was similar to those sections of Irish nationalist communities in the UK during an earlier terrorist campaign. Salafis had become ‘suspect communities’. Thus, just as Protestants from Northern Ireland living on the mainland had a largely benign experience of counter-terrorism policing compared to their Republican and nationalist counterparts during ‘the Troubles’, so will the different Muslim community experiences be imperfectly understood until its internal conflicts and rich diversity is acknowledged.

Nearly two years after 7/7 stigmatisation has increased considerably for Salafis, more so than for most other Muslims who have nonetheless faced instances of a less discerning Islamophobia. Influential commentators appear to have succeeded in convincing government and the public that the terrorist threat is rooted in a Salafi or Islamist hatred of the West, that was imported to the UK from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East. As a result long-standing points of religious and cultural tension between different Muslim communities – for example between majority, more traditional Barelvis and minority Salafis – have been heightened by government policy, which now seeks partnerships with the most compliant sections of the faith community.

Thus it has become commonplace to see government and Muslim community leaders sharing platforms to cast further suspicion on those ‘other’ sections of Muslim communities where al-Qaeda propagandists seek most recruits. For Salafi community leaders working against al-Qaeda influence in their communities, the pressure of a double stigmatisation – association with terrorists from without and the slur of informant from within – can be hugely stressful. Only a more enlightened counter-terrorism policy that empowers all sections of Muslim communities, rather than one that empowers one section against another, will reduce the risk of further alienating small but important sections of a stigmatised faith community.

Dr Basia Spalek is Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Birmingham. **Bob Lambert** is a PhD candidate at Exeter University.

References

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